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**THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT
TO MINDANAO**

Policy of the New Government



President Corazon C. Aquino

midanao - Government policy

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**THE MUSLIMS IN THE PHILIPPINES —
Policy of the New Government**

The February Revolution marks the successful culmination of the struggle of the Filipino people to overthrow the dictatorial regime of President Marcos and to restore peace, justice, freedom and democracy in our country.

Our Muslim brothers have played a significant role in this struggle and have kept alive the spirit of resistance during the dark days of martial law. As participants in the struggle and as citizens of the Republic, they are entitled to their just share in the fruits of the revolution. The expectation of our Muslim brothers are centered around the idea of justice and development as well as the hope that past indifference and neglect will be re-

The new administration is pledged to its early realization.

Brief Background

Scholars have written that one of the root causes of the Mindanao problem could be attributed to the population movement from Luzon and the Visayas which led to the social and economic dislocation of the Muslim population. Agrarian conflicts in the region have become more acute due to the occupation of traditional Muslim lands.

New settlers populated the profitable market centers and wider agricultural areas of Mindanao, edging out the Muslims who were relegated to being mere rural farm settlers and small-time suppliers. As a result, in both urban and rural areas, the Muslims now constitute an economic minority. In contrast, the other groups represent the dominant economic force. This scenario illustrates the socio-economic imbalance in the general structure between the migrant groups and the indigenous Muslim community. Hand in hand with increasing non-Muslim migration to the area was the growing Islamic consciousness among the Filipino Muslims, through increased contacts with the Muslim world, which generated Muslim separatist ideas.

The plight of the Filipino Muslims was compounded by the imposition of martial law in 1972 which, in the effort of the Marcos dictatorship to perpetuate itself in power, disregarded valid grievances in the region.

It is reported that tens of thousands of Muslim Filipinos, men and women, have been slain, maimed or deprived of profitable activity as a consequence of martial law. Muslim refugees in Sabah are now widely estimated at over 300,000. Likewise, damage to farm crops and property remains incalculable.

Thus, the 20-year regime of deposed President Marcos only exacerbated the Muslim rebellion, creating a sense of unity among the Muslim rebels in their confrontation with the Marcos forces. The mid-1970s saw the height of the armed conflict, forcing Marcos to commit a substantial portion of AFP's manpower and resources in containing the rebels. The steadfast resistance of the Filipino Muslims to the corrupt and oppressive regime contributed immensely to the eventual downfall of Marcos.

The unresolved Mindanao problem is a major impediment to the restoration of peace and, therefore, the progress and development of the region. Its existence is costly, in terms of time, effort and material resources of civil and military authorities.

In the aftermath of the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, there now appears to be a renewal of hope among Filipinos, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For one thing, President Corazon C. Aquino possesses the qualities of sincerity and credibility that were sorely wanting in the previous regime. President Aquino has openly declared that she is ready to talk and to deal justly with all armed opposition groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front.

The Muslim Secessionist Movement

To understand better the question of the Muslim secessionist movement, analysts advert to some of the general causes that normally lead minority ethnic or cultural groups to aim at secession. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The feeling of the ethnic or cultural minorities groups

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that they are internally colonized by the majority groups;

2. The impression of such groups that they are subordinate to the dominant group in matters of political and economic relations;

3. The tensions arising when the dominant group believes in its cultural superiority and denigrates the cultures of the minority groups while, at the same time, legitimizing its power to dominate the others on this belief;

4. The existence of conflicts stemming from competition for scarce resources in areas where the minority group lives as well as in competition for civil, military and political positions on the national level; and

5. The assertion by the minority groups of their historical achievements and cultural values as a reaction to the belief of cultural superiority by the dominant group.

However, there is something more to the assertion that a secessionist movement represents an effort to preserve a culture or deeply cherished traditional values. It also promises a better life in both the material and spiritual planes. The actual struggle itself is used as the very technique to reinforce cultural differences from the other while the sacrifices as well as the demand that blood must be spilled are rationalized within the value system of the culture. Another way is to show that this is shared by other peoples who do not belong to the body politic. The struggle thus achieves, in modern world, an international character which serves as an added ingredient to its claim for legitimacy.

A factor that must be carefully considered in any policy-

making process that will affect the Filipino Muslims is that they deeply cherish their religion and community cohesion. Their culture in the past had given them psychological stability, a sense of dignity, and a sense of individual worth. In their struggle against all forms of colonization, their religion and cultural values had served them as well as a source of identity and strength.

Policy Statements

1. The 1976 Tripoli Agreement is a solemn commitment of the Philippine government. The new administration sincerely wants to accommodate the just aspirations of the Filipino Muslims for real and meaningful autonomy, provided that it is done within the framework of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic. The new government also sympathizes with the aspirations of all Filipino Muslims for representation and participation in the mainstream of the nation's political, economic and social life.

The words of late Senator Benigno Aquino ring with particular clarity on this point. In a lecture delivered at the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah on 12 May 1981, he said: "I therefore would like to propose that the Philippine government return to the original Tripoli Agreement. If the Philippine government will return to the original Tripoli Agreement, then we will make an appeal to our Muslim brothers to come back to the table so that we can discuss our problems rather than shoot it out. If we do not negotiate, my friends, there will be a return to bloodshed and more people will die. But we promised our Muslim brothers that if they will come back to the negotiating table, if they will come back to the Tripoli Agreement, then the entire Christian north will support them in the claim."

Despite the conclusion of the Tripoli Agreement on 23 December 1976, there was no serious effort by the previous regime to address the Muslim grievances. Some Muslim leaders believe former President Marcos never fully implemented the Agreement. They further assert that the establishment of the token autonomy by creating two regional autonomous governments in regions IX and XII were contrary to the letter and spirit of the Tripoli accord. Thus, the question of autonomy in the predominantly Muslim areas goes to the heart of the Muslim problem.

In order to allay fears that autonomy for the Muslims is only a transitory issue which future national leaders may disregard at will, members of the Constitutional Convention now drafting the new fundamental law of the land have unanimously approved the grant of autonomy to the Southern Philippine region and to the Cordilleras in Luzon. The new Constitution, to be submitted for ratification by the entire Filipino nation sometime before the end of this year, will embody a provision requiring the new Congress, after consulting with multi-sectoral groups in these two areas, to enact regional charters extending autonomy. The territories to be covered by the two regions shall consider historical, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, communal and economic factors.

2. Regarding the participation of Filipino Muslims in the government, we realize that it no longer suffices to give our Muslim brothers token participation in government. Accordingly, the new government has appointed Muslims to key positions in the national government and will continue to do so.

3. Industrial plants, big commercial establishments and agricultural corporations in the traditional Muslim areas will

henceforth be required to proceed with all deliberate speed to adopt affirmative action programs, including the employment of a proportionate number of their workers from among the Muslim residents in the area, whenever possible.

4. Disposable public Muslim ancestral lands will be distributed to landless Filipino Muslims within the context of the new land reform program of the President. Likewise, appropriate government agencies will be asked to assist the beneficiaries in their agricultural endeavors to enable them to attain a decent level of livelihood.

5. The Philippine Amanah Bank as well as the Southern Philippines Development Authority will be restructured to make them effective instruments in the development of Filipino Muslim's entrepreneurial and managerial talents as well as in the formation of Muslim commercial and industrial corporations.

6. The new administration is committed to a policy that will safeguard the values, customs and culture of Filipino Muslims. Their freedom and opportunity to preserve and strengthen their cultural identity is as important, if not more so, as their progress on economic and social matters.

7. It is also our national policy to preserve our Muslim heritage, to grant our Muslim brothers a just measure of political rights and to render to them all possible support, cooperation in solving poverty, social and economic problems. Ours is a policy of reconciliation, redemption, attraction and improvement of the lives of Filipinos, regardless of religious affiliation.

8. While we seek the support of our foreign friends in helping us overcome our domestic Muslim problem, we also ask that we be given the opportunity to work it out in the way that we deem it necessary. While we are willing to listen to the advice of friends, the Filipinos themselves should decide their own affairs since it is they who will bear whatever burden and reap whatever rewards may come from their own choice. However, we appreciate the good intentions of those who seek constructive change in our country. Like them, we believe in the urgency of a timely and concerted action to finally overcome our recurring problems in Mindanao.

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